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**MAYOR LORI E. LIGHTFOOT, COMMUNITY LEADERS BREAK GROUND ON
ASPIRE CENTER, A NEW WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT HUB, BUSINESS
INCUBATOR, AND COMMUNITY SPACE IN AUSTIN**

*The event also celebrated recently announced plans for a new Illinois Tool Works
manufacturing facility in the community*

CHICAGO — Today, Mayor Lori E. Lightfoot was joined by Alderman Chris Taliaferro, Department of Planning and Development (DPD) Commissioner Maurice Cox, and representatives from Austin Coming Together (ACT), West Side Health Authority, BMO, United Way of Metro Chicago, and Illinois Tool Works (ITW) in a groundbreaking ceremony for the **Aspire Center** in Austin.

The **\$40.9M INVEST South/West** project is being led by Westside Health Authority, Austin Coming Together, and the Jane Addams Resource Corp., and it is supported by \$12.25M in Tax Increment Financing (TIF) assistance approved by City Council last month. The Aspire Center will be housed in the former Robert Emmet Elementary School, a 69,100-square-foot building at 5500 W. Madison Ave., which closed in 2013.

“When I first took office as Mayor, I made a commitment to Chicago residents that my administration would direct City resources back into neighborhoods that had been overlooked for decades,” said **Mayor Lightfoot**. “My INVEST South/West initiative was born out of that commitment, and today’s groundbreaking is the latest example of how my team has executed that vision. The programs and services that the Aspire Center offers will unlock countless career opportunities for Austin residents and support local entrepreneurs who want to create new businesses or expand existing businesses in this community. I look forward to seeing the day that Austin’s potential is fully realized, and I know that the Aspire Center’s presence here will hasten the arrival of that day.”

The Aspire Center will be a multi-use facility that includes an advanced manufacturing training center, small business incubator, community hub, and event space. Specific on-site services are planned to include job readiness and vocational training, financial coaching, and employment services. The project is anticipated to create 50 permanent jobs and train more than 2,000 workers over the next five years. Initial construction on the future Aspire Center is currently underway and the project is expected to reach completion in late 2024.



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“Spaces like the Aspire Center are incredible assets to our communities,” said **Alderman Taliaferro** (29th Ward). “There are an increasing number of career opportunities in manufacturing and skilled trades in Chicago. By bringing career development and technical education services here where folks can easily access them, we are going to greatly increase Austin residents’ ability to be competitive for jobs in those fields.”

West Side Health Authority owns and is leading the renovation of the former Emmet Elementary building and will co-manage the completed facility with Austin Coming Together. Lamar Johnson Collaborative serves as the architect for the project.

In December 2022, the West Side Health Authority’s POPFit! community plaza opened on a portion of the three-acre property shared by the Aspire Center through a \$500,000 DPD Chicago Recovery Plan grant.

“The former Emmet School directly reflects the community’s priorities for adaptive re-use, second only to Laramie Bank,” DPD Commissioner Maurice Cox said. “With today’s groundbreaking, Austin’s two most prominent vacant buildings are being restored as the neighborhood focal points they were always meant to be.”

The Aspire Center was selected to receive City support through the Department of Planning and Development’s (DPD) Community Development Grant program. Austin Coming Together will operate a walk-in community hub in the new center to provide resources to anyone in need.

“United Way is proud to work alongside the community leaders — including our longtime partner Darnell Shields and Austin Coming Together — who are making the strategies set forth in the Austin Quality-of-Life-Plan a reality,” said **Sean Garrett**, United Way of Metro Chicago President and CEO. “Our investment in the Aspire Center marks the most significant investment in our organization’s history, which was made possible because of the many donors and partners who believe in this work and the vision that real, transformative change can and will happen.”

Darrel Hackett, President, BMO Wealth Management-U.S., joined Mayor Lightfoot at the groundbreaking to celebrate the bank’s partnership with the City in supporting INVEST South/West projects.

“BMO has a strong history of investing in the communities it serves, which is why we were thrilled to become a cornerstone investor in the United Way Neighborhood Networks 10 years ago,” said Mr. Hackett. “The groundbreaking of the Aspire Center, led by Westside Health Authority and Austin Coming Together, alongside the recent openings of the new BUILD community hub and North Austin Community Center, is



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another proof point that neighborhood-led transformation can work. BMO remains committed to growing the good for the Austin neighborhood — and the city of Chicago.”

In addition to City support through the allocation of TIF funds, State **Representative La Shawn K. Ford** worked to secure \$10M in state funds for the Aspire Center when the project was in its early stages.

“This project will redevelop a vacant building in the Austin community that has diminished property values and caused an unhealthy environment on the West Side,” said Representative Ford. “This development project is finally getting underway after years of community outreach here in Austin. I’m proud to have negotiated in Springfield to secure 10 million dollars to help fund this development. The career development and education services will help lift families out of poverty and the Aspire Center will provide a boost for the West Side and I can’t wait to see the finished product.”

Mayor Lightfoot’s remarks also acknowledged and celebrated ITW’s recently announced plans to open a manufacturing facility in the Austin neighborhood. ITW will seek to partner with local workforce development organizations to hire residents to staff and lead operations at their new Austin facility.

“ITW is extremely proud to partner with the United Way of Metro Chicago and Austin Coming Together to leverage the power of Austin’s Neighborhood Network to contribute to the strength and resilience of the Austin neighborhood,” said **Kenneth Escoe**, Executive Vice President and project leader for ITW’s Commit to a Neighborhood Initiative in Austin. “Our goal is to serve as a catalyst for further economic development and growth here in Austin by leveraging our business needs and economic ecosystem to bring quality jobs with good benefits to Austin, both directly through our own manufacturing facility and through focused efforts to build a local supplier base to support it.”

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